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## GAME OF THE CHILD-STEALING WITCH.

IN a collection <sup>1</sup> which contains several versions of this interesting game, I have observed :—

This game without doubt is the most curious of our collection, both on account of its own quaintness, and because of the extraordinary relation in which it stands to the child-lore of Europe. We have, in a note, endeavored to show that our American versions give the most ancient and adequate representation now existing of a childish drama which has diverged into numerous branches, and of which almost every trait has set up for itself as an independent game. Several of these offshoots are centuries old, and exist in many European tongues ; while, so far as appears, their original has best maintained itself in the childish tradition of the New World.

In one respect, the statement requires modification. It has since appeared that the game, in identical forms, has been equally familiar in England. The two versions which follow were obtained by me in London.<sup>2</sup>

Persons represented, a Mother, Eldest Daughter, and several children.

*Mother* (speaks). Chickany, chickany, crany, crow,  
Went to the well to wash her toe,  
And when she came back her chicken was dead.<sup>3</sup>

The Mother goes out, commending her children to the care of her eldest daughter. After she has been absent for some time, the latter cries to the former, who is supposed to be out of sight :—

“Mother, mother, the pot is boiling over!”

“Daughter, take a spoon and stir it up.”

“Where to get one?”

“There is one in the cupboard.”

“Can’t reach it.”

“Stand on the chair.”

“The chair’s broke, and stands on three legs.”

“Then take the stool.”

“Can’t find it.”

“I must come and do it myself.”

<sup>1</sup> *Games and Songs of Children*, Harper & Brothers, 1883, pp. 215–221, and note.

<sup>2</sup> A version from Cornwall will be found in *The Folk-Lore Journal*, vol. v., 1887, p. 53.

<sup>3</sup> The mother, it will be seen, represents a hen with her brood ; it is a childish inclination to symbolize human action by animal characters.

The daughter, however, finds the spoon, and proceeds to stir the pot.

Witch enters, with a large cloak, under which she carries off a child.

Mother returns, and asks : "Where is little (Fanny)?"

Eldest Daughter replies : "I don't know. While I was skimming the pot, the Old Witch came and took her."

Mother, armed with a switch, chases her daughter round the room, and says :—

"Now I am going out again, and I hope nothing will happen this time."

The children, one by one, are all carried off in like manner, and stand outside the house with their frocks over their heads. They receive from the witch the names of Beef, Potatoes, Salt, Pepper, etc. The Witch then sends out and invites the Mother to come and take dinner. She answers :—

"I can't come, my stockings are too dirty."

"Take off your stockings."

"My shoes are nearly worn out."

"Take off your shoes."

"My feet are not fit."

"Cut off your feet."

At last the Mother is obliged to accept the invitation of the Witch, who offers her a dish. She tastes and says :—

"This is my (Fanny)," then reanimates her and sends her home, saying :—

"Let your great big toe carry you home."<sup>1</sup>

The same process is repeated until all the children are rescued.

In a second version, the children are named after the days of the week ; otherwise, the persons acting are the same. While the mother is absent, the Old Witch comes, and says to the children :—

"Give me a match to light my pipe."

The "Oldest Daughter" goes upstairs to get the match, and the Witch carries off a child.

The Mother, returning, and finding one child gone, scolds the Oldest Daughter. The action is repeated, until all the children are taken. The Mother now going out to search for her children, the Witch meets her, and invites her to dinner. The Witch puts the children behind her, and calls them by new names, Beef, Lamb, Mutton, Potatoes, and the like. The Mother comes in, and pretends to taste the beef, then exclaims :—

<sup>1</sup> In an American version the child puts out her foot (to represent the dish), which perhaps explains the phrase.

"Oh, that's Monday; tell her to come out!"

The process is repeated until all the children are disenchanting. They then rush at the Old Witch, and torment her as much as they can.

These English forms are essentially identical with the first three American versions of my printed collection.

A trait of the second form of the game above given is the request of the Witch, "Give me a match to light my pipe."<sup>1</sup> From this it might be inferred that this feature at least is of modern origin, since pipes and matches are recent inventions. It so happens, however, that the trait, rightly understood, demonstrates the primitive character of the amusement.

I have lately received the following version of the game, as formerly played in Boston:—

Persons represented, Mother, daughter called Fairest of the Fair, other children unnamed, and Witch.

*Mother.* (*Puts on bonnet and addresses Fairest of the Fair.*) You mind the children, I am going out to mind the pigs. Give nothing from the house to-day. (*Exit. As she departs she makes the sign of the cross by crossing the two first fingers of the right hand, as if to bless the house.*) Fairest of the Fair now sits down, and knits, sews, or spins, while the other children play about her. Enter Witch, in crouching attitude, or leaning on a staff, with the skirt of her gown thrown over her head, and held at the chin. Handfuls of grass are sometimes tucked in at the back of the neck, to represent streaming hair.

*W.* (*Addresses F.*) Give me fire, I'm cold.

*F.* No, I'm busy.

*W.* (*Takes out a basket, exhibits a splendid necklace, compliments Fairest of the Fair on her beauty, and points out the becomingness of the ornament.*) All for one lighted sod, and one fat child.

*F.* (*Tries on necklace.*) Take them.

*Reënter Mother.*

*M.* Are the children at home?

*F.* Cannot say.

*M.* (*Counts the children.*) There is one missing.

*F.* She has gone to get buttermilk. Supper is ready.

*M.* The children are gone, and where did you get the necklace?

*F.* I bought it.

*M.* What did you give for it?

*F.* A lighted sod, and one fat child.

<sup>1</sup> See p. 217, *op. cit.*

*M. (Beats F.)* I told you not to give anything from the house.

*F.* I did n't, I sold it.

*Mother scolds her, and the children are put to bed.*

The previous action is now repeated with variations, the mother saying : " Sell nothing from the house." Fairest of the Fair, however, professes a willingness to give the child, if the Witch will give her a bracelet. When the Mother returns, she finds another child gone, and reproves her daughter.

*M.* I told you not to sell.

*F.* I did n't sell, I gave.

*M.* Neither sell nor give.

The third time, Fairest of the Fair tells the Witch to take the child, if she will leave something in exchange, and when reproached by the Mother, excuses herself, saying : " I exchanged." Sometimes two or three children are given at once, so that all are gone in the course of the three repetitions.

When the Mother discovers that her children have disappeared, she beats Fairest of the Fair out of the house, and says : " You are no longer Fairest of the Fair ; you look like the Devil himself, with your wicked face. You will never be Fairest of the Fair again, till you have brought me back my lighted sods, and my (six) fat children, and got rid of your ill-gotten jewels."

Fairest of the Fair goes out, finds the house where the Witch lives. In the absence of the Witch she enters, seizes a lighted sod and one fat child, and drops her necklace in the place where the child stood.

A game of tag now follows, in which the children try to be touched by Fairest of the Fair, while the Witch endeavors to prevent them. Finally the children are all recovered, and the game is ended, the Mother saying : " Now you are again Fairest of the Fair."

The game is of long duration, and played with many variations and original additions.

In this way of playing, the demand of the Witch is " Give me fire." Not only does this form appear older, but the antiquity of the trait in this particular game is demonstrated by comparison with European varieties of the amusement. The petition therefore relates to the custom of lighting fires by means of embers. It is not long since, even in the most civilized countries, the readiest way of kindling an extinguished fire was by seeking coals from a neighbor, and nothing could be more natural than such an appeal. Until the present century, in the United States as well as elsewhere, the fire in the living-room was carefully covered at night, in order to provide coals sufficient for use in the morning.

Now, in the European games we find that a demand for fire, or for

a light, on the part of a stranger, constitutes ground for suspicion of witchcraft, and that such a request must not be complied with.

Thus, in a Swedish game, called "Borrowing Fire" (*låna eld*),<sup>1</sup> the players sit in a ring, while a solitary person walks about the circle, and asks some one of the party: "May I borrow fire?" The reply is: "Go to the neighbor." The persons seated change places, and the questioner seizes on a seat. The odd player is left to begin the sport for the second time.

In an Italian game<sup>2</sup> corresponding to our English "Puss in the corner" (one of the innumerable growths from the stock under consideration), a fifth player approaches one of the four who are stationed in the corners of the room, upon the pretence of having a candle to light.

The person addressed replies: "Go to my neighbor."

But it may be asked, since borrowing coals, or a lighted candle, was a general custom, why should such request be especially characteristic of a witch?

This natural inquiry is answered, in a measure, by a passage from a remarkable paper of Mr. James Mooney, on "The Holiday Customs of Ireland."<sup>3</sup>

Fire is held sacred in Ireland, and there are a number of May-day beliefs connected with it. None will be given out of the house on this day for any consideration, as such an act brings all kinds of ill-fortune upon the family, and especially enables the borrower to steal all the butter from the milk, so that any one who should ask for the loan of a lighted sod of turf on May Day would be regarded as a suspicious character, whom it would be just as well to watch. To give out either fire or salt on this day is to give away the year's luck. One old writer states that fire would be given only to a sick person, and then with an imprecation; but the butter, if stolen, might be recovered by burning some of the thatch from over the door. In the city of Limerick the fire is always lighted by the man of the house on May morning, as it is unlucky to have it done by a woman.

Lady Wilde says that if the fire goes out on May morning it is

<sup>1</sup> Arwiddson, iii. 441 (see bibliography in collection mentioned).

<sup>2</sup> Bernoni, *G. pop. Venez.*, No. 44; Pitre, *G. Fanciulleschi Sicil.*, No. 146, mentions the title of a form of this game, *Barabon, un po' di feu*, where the first word obviously represents the knock of the Witch. So in Spain (Catalonia, *Maspons y Labrós, Fochs*, etc., p. 89). A child comes to the door, and asks: "Ave Maria!" "Who's there?" "Have you fire?" "Not a spark." (The first words relate to the usual Catalan formula in which admission is requested: *Ave Maria purissima*, the reply being: *Sin pecado concebuda*.) The rest of the Catalan game turns upon the stealing of leeks from the garden; but this is only a variety of the witch-game, in which the children are represented by plants, as in other varieties by names of animals, birds, ribbons, colors, and the like.

<sup>3</sup> *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 1889, pp. 393, 394.

considered very unlucky, and it cannot be rekindled except by a lighted sod brought from the priest's house. The ashes of this blessed turf are afterwards sprinkled on the floor and the threshold of the house. Milk is poured on the threshold, and the traveller who drinks a cup of milk must take it in the house, and with a pinch of salt in it, for no fire, water, salt, or milk must be given out on this day.<sup>1</sup>

This superstition is further curiously elucidated by the manner of playing the New England game in the archaic version above mentioned. When the Witch asks for coals to light her fire, the child, who in the drama represents the Mother, proceeds to fetch these, and gives them to the stranger, making, however, the sign of the cross by crossing the forefingers of the two hands over the (imaginary) gift. The request being repeated, and a second time complied with, the Mother forgets to make the holy sign, in consequence of which she falls into the power of the Witch.

It seems clear, then, that the trait under discussion implies the existence of an ancient belief that a person of evil disposition, who should succeed in obtaining a portion of the household fire, would be by that means enabled to exert control over the persons as well as property of the inmates of the house.

The reason why such a request, according to Irish belief, is more dangerous on May Day than on any other day, appears to be because May Day, in the modern survival, represents the ancient annual festival on which all the fires of the village were extinguished (since fire, in the course of the year, is supposed to have received some taint from its domestic use), in order to be relighted by brands taken from a new fire, kindled by the proper person with appropriate ceremonies. As this new fire would be particularly efficacious and especially sacred, the desire of witches and other evil beings to come into possession of it would be correspondingly eager. The attempt of a stranger to acquire any part of the new fire on this day would therefore be regarded with especial suspicion.

I am told, however (by the informant whose contributions have been already acknowledged), that in New England folk-lore a request for fire is supposed to indicate that the petitioner is a witch. Indeed, the game I am discussing evidently involves such an idea. It may therefore be suspected (though I cannot quote other authority), that a demand made by an unknown person, at any time, to obtain fire from the family hearth, without adequate explanation, would anciently have been regarded with distrust, and that embers would only have been given, with ceremonies (like the sign of the cross) designed to avert any evil influence which might result.

<sup>1</sup> *Anc. Legends and Superstitions of Ireland*, i. 261.

Our game, therefore, furnishes a striking proof that in the beliefs mentioned relating to the household fire, though they may have survived longest in a Celtic country, there is nothing peculiarly Celtic, but that Old English, and indeed European custom and belief were in this respect absolutely identical with that of Celtic countries.

It will be seen how considerable is the contribution to philosophy and history which may be made even by the play of children.

There are two forms of our game, both widely diffused. In the first the Witch is represented as *stealing* the children, in the second as *begging* them from the Mother. A hint as to the nature of the connection between these is given by a version communicated by a friend, who can remember no more than the outline of the game, as formerly played by her in Boston: "A witch, with piteous gestures, comes to a mother, and endeavors to *beg* from her a child. Being refused, she returns on the next day, and tries to *borrow* a child. When still unsuccessful, on the third day she comes to the house and *steals* the child in the absence of the mother."

An attempt to fully discuss the varieties of the witch-game would require a space far in excess of that which can here be devoted to the subject; this game-root has supplied at least one tenth of all the amusements of European children, a fact which indicates its primitive antiquity. Its variations are infinite: in some forms, in place of Mother stands an angel or saint, in the place of the Witch the Devil; the sport takes the form of a game of chase, or of struggle, or of guessing, or of a simple love-dance; while, strange to say, its primitive character appears nowhere so distinctly as in English versions, though there are abundant indications that the English forms merely represent the most perfect survival of a world-old practice, so various and so widely extended that it would be idle to ask in what land it originated, while it may be reasonably presumed that it has for thousands of years made the terror and pleasure of European youth.

I will content myself, for the present, with pointing out the relation of our English game to a number of French songs belonging to this type.

A dialogue printed by E. Rolland<sup>1</sup> proceeds as follows:—

Catherine, dors tu ? —  
Non, c'est mes enfants qui me reveillent. —  
Combien n'as tu ? —  
J'en ai cinquante et un. —  
Veux-tu m'en donner un ? —  
Je t'en avais donné un l'aut' jour.  
Qué qu' t'en as fait ? —  
Je l'ai mis dans la balance,

<sup>1</sup> *Rimes et Jeux de l'Enfance*, Paris, 1883, p. 375.



Il est parti en France,  
Je l'ai mis dans son lit,  
Il est parti en paradis.

The same personage, Catherine, who is none other than St. Catherine of Sienna, appears in a Sicilian form of the dialogue (Pitrè, No. 137); the mistress of the game sits at the head of her family, and the question is: "Where is St. Catherine?" The messenger of the king asks for a child, and receives it; he then returns, saying: "My master has sent me for a lamb." "I gave you one." "It was rotten, I threw it away." "I have no more." The messenger, however, uses threats, at last declaring that various beasts, whose action he imitates, shall bite Catherine; when he threatens the vengeance of the serpent, the saint yields, and says: "Take it."

The emissary in the French game represents the Devil, and the allusion to the "balance" refers to the practice of determining whether the child taken should be a devil or an angel, by weighing it in the scales of St. Michael, in imitation of the Judgment, taken as literal by the Middle Age. (Games and Songs, No. 152.)

The game passed into a dance. Thus, in a pretty version given by Celnart (p. 382), the "neighbor" advances toward a row of girls standing in a line:—

Que tu as de jolies filles !  
Olivé Beauvé  
Que tu as de jolies filles !  
Sur le pont-chevalier.

The dialogue then proceeds with the same refrain and repetition:—

Elles sont plus jolies que les tiennes —  
Veux-tu bien m'en donner une —  
Je la donne, si tu l'attrapes —

The neighbor now attempts to catch a girl, being allowed to seize only the two at the end, so that Olivé Beauvé defends her charges by interposing between the assailant and the troop behind her; such is also the arrangement in a familiar English game, called "Hen and Chickens," "Fox and Geese," or some similar title; the sport is at bottom only a variation of the infinitely varied theme now under consideration.

The refrain "on the bridge" refers to the place where the game was played. In the Middle Ages, where there was but little room in the closely built towns, bridges, where such existed, offering as they did fresh air and a prospect, were the especial resort for folk bent on merriment. (Compare the well-known rhyme, *Sur le Pont d'Avignon*). We have here, not a mother with her family, but a collection of beauties for whose possession a gallant implores. The

game which represented the cannibal designs of the child-eating witch has become a game of courtly love-making.

The primitive character of the amusement, however, survives in a modern provincial French version ("Chants du Cambresis," i. p. 77), where a row of children stands against a wall, while a girl advances limping, and is addressed by the row : —

Ou allez-vous, pauvre boiteuse,  
Gilotin, Gilotin,  
Ou allez-vous, pauvre boiteuse,  
Gilotin parfin ?

The reply is, that "the poor lame one" is going to the wood to pick violets for her sisters ; in answer to the inquiry where are her sisters, she replies : "Here is one," at the same time leading a girl by the hand.

We see how the original idea appears ; the limp is the characteristic of the witch or devil, who disguises her evil designs under a semblance of honest purpose.

A form of this same dance-rhyme is an old song which has enjoyed great popularity : —

Que t'as de belles filles,  
Giroflé, girofla,  
Que tu as de belles filles,  
L'amour m'y comp'tra.

To the same cycle belongs a rhyme which is given without the method of playing (E. Rolland, p. 80), but which evidently belongs to the second part of the game, where the mother, going in search of her lost children, comes to the house of the witch : —

Bonjour, madame la blanchisseuse,  
A la feuille, feuille ;  
Bonjour, madame la blanchisseuse,  
A la feuille d'olivier.

The dialogue continues, with the same refrain : —

Je viens chercher mon enfant —  
Tenez, voilà votre enfant —  
Mon enfant avait deux yeux —  
Tenez, voilà votre enfant —  
Mon enfant avait deux bras —  
Tenez, voilà votre enfant —  
Mon enfant avait deux pieds —

In a version in my possession collected in England, after the mother recovers her children, they relate their grievances, saying that the witch has "cut off a hand, and a foot, and an eye." It may therefore be presumed that the French rhyme takes up our game at the point in which the mother, in the den of the witch, recognizes

her mutilated children. The pretty refrain relates to the locality of the dance, as taking place under the leafy olive-trees.

To follow out the endless variations of the game of the witch would require a volume. I shall be glad to obtain as many English versions as may be communicated. At a future time, I may offer some remarks on the antiquity and diffusion of the idea at the basis of the custom.

*William Wells Newell.*